Cultural strategies and local cultural decision making

RESEARCH PAPER

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Abstract

The study of cultural strategies remains an emergent field and this paper consolidates current research and scholarly discussion on the subject. This paper then applies a thematic analysis to three micro-case studies of local authorities in order to provide an indicative set of implications for policy. The central research theme of this paper is evaluation of cultural strategies with particular focus on process and representation, scale, instigators, evaluation methods and reporting. Drawing on current research in the field conducted by Dan Ashton and Makanani Bell (2023), Ali FitzGibbon and Kim-Marie Spence (2023) this paper argues for a more localised and collaborative understanding of evaluation in practice and theory that captures outcomes and the nuances of different value systems rather than outputs-based reporting.

Keywords

evaluation; cultural strategy; policy; place

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For the purposes of this programme, Culture Commons are applying a broad and inclusive definition of the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem, which includes: firms in the creative industries (as defined by DCMS Standard Industrial Classification Codes); the publicly and privately funded cultural sectors; the workforce operating within the Creative Economy (i.e. workers with DCMS Standard Occupation Classification Codes and those in Creative Occupations working in other parts of the economy), including employed, freelance/self-employed and atypical workers; arm's length bodies (such as Arts Council's); grant giving bodies (such as Trusts and Foundations); the research community (including schools, colleges, higher education institutions and informal sites

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Executive Summary

My role within the future of local cultural decision making project was as an academic partner with The Centre for Cultural Value. I was commissioned to focus on the role that cultural strategies play in supporting the development of local creative, cultural and heritage infrastructures and, in particular, as tools for enabling local cultural decision making. This research assessed the degree to which cultural strategies incorporate and deliver/report against stated objectives and/or evaluation frameworks to support the realisation of any stated objectives.

Methodology

A rapid literature review from both peer-reviewed and key grey literature sources, including official reports and published cultural strategies, as well as a thematic analysis of a series of case studies based on three partner local authorities.

Research Questions

- What was the instigating impulse for the development of the cultural strategies?
- Do the strategies align objectives and measurements of success with other wider city/region/national strategies?
- How do the cultural strategies facilitate local cultural decision making related to the creative, cultural and heritage sectors?
- Is there any evidence that the strategies have led to the achievement of the objectives set out in the strategies?
- What methods of evaluation have been implemented to review the impact of local cultural strategies as delivered?
- Do they include explicit reference to social/community impacts or are they more orientated towards creative industries growth?
- How can we compare the impact of cultural strategies by regional scale and focus?

Key Themes

- At present, there appears to be no formal methodologies or frameworks for evaluating cultural strategies. Local authorities tend to evaluate cultural strategies based on their *outputs* rather than *outcomes*.

- Cultural strategies need to be understood as more than simply static physical policy documents. They have different stages from the inception of the strategy to the evaluation of how plans have been delivered.

- Developing trust between individuals, stakeholder groups and communities may be better realised through longer-term programmes and open-ended platforms that can foster relationships over time.

Findings and Implications for Policy

- Cultural strategy development convenes place-specific and multi-stakeholder relationships that require timebound action plans. They have a life cycle and are more than physical policy documents.

- At present, there appear to be no formal methodologies or frameworks for evaluating cultural strategies.

- Co-design and people-centred evaluation processes remain scarce.

- Local authorities tend to evaluate cultural strategies based on *outputs* rather than *outcomes*.

- Strategies can be initiated in different ways, including from within the culture sectors themselves. As a result, having a clear understanding of the local cultural ecosystems is vital when developing cultural strategies.

- Taking one group, neighbourhood or organisation as a proxy for the complexities of different people and communities can lead to.

- Developing trust between individuals, stakeholder groups and communities may be better realised through longer-term programmes and open-ended platforms that can foster relationships over time.

- Local authorities are increasingly employing participatory methodologies to develop their cultural strategies. However, the extent to which management and leadership structures at higher levels of decision making are moving towards embedding co-design remains limited.

- Local authorities need to do more to establish a shared understanding of key priorities in areas such as participation.

- Comparing cultural strategies may require reconceptualising 'locality' as a contested space where different international, national, regional and local identities and narratives might converge.

- Policymakers need to look at how adjacent policy areas such as health and education can intersect with cultural polices in order to better align cultural strategies with other local and regional strategies and policy priorities.

- There is untapped potential for more collaborative evaluation methodologies to bring together discrete evaluations with deeper insights from place-based funded projects. This would require access to local data that is currently disparate and, in some cases, non-existent.

Introduction

Cultural strategies are increasingly seen as playing an important role in policymaking at the local, combined and national levels across the UK (Barker and Jordan 2022) and are often developed with an aim to help connect cultural provision and support with social, economic and environmental outcomes (Ashton and Bell 2023).

This paper presents a discussion of the role that cultural strategies play in supporting the development of local creative, cultural and heritage infrastructures and, in particular, as tools for facilitating local cultural decision making.

Findings from this paper will be submitted as formal evidence to the policymaking phase of the open policy development programme.

Methodology

This paper is supported by a rapid literature review from both peer-reviewed and key grey literature sources, including official reports and published cultural strategies, as well as analysis of a series of case studies.[1]

This study was a 'snapshot' of research conducted between January 2000 to March 2024 and so limited in terms of timeframe. This was due to the time limited nature of this project. However, these sources did point to two citations outside the established timeframe, and these were duly reviewed.

The cultural strategies reviewed in detail are from: Wigan Council, Belfast City Council and Sheffield City Council. The rationale for these three case studies was that each of these local authorities were partners on the project and offered a timely opportunity to delve deeper into the processes involved in cultural strategy lifecycles.

The research questions that informed both the literature review and the approach to the case studies were:

- *What was the instigating impulse for the development of the cultural strategies?*

- *Do the strategies align objectives with other wider city, region or national cultural (or other) strategies?*

- *How do the cultural strategies facilitate local cultural decision making related to the creative, cultural and heritage sectors in particular?*

- *What methods of evaluation have been implemented to review the impact of local cultural strategies as delivered?*

- *Do they include explicit reference to social and/or community impacts or are they more orientated towards creative industries and "growth" in general?*

- *How can we compare the impact of cultural strategies by regional scale and focus?*

The following review takes a thematic approach by drawing out key themes from the literature.

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[1] A generalised Google/ Google Scholar search was carried out coupled with keyword search terms of peer-review journal databases which included: Taylor and Francis, MDPI, Web of Science, JSTOR and a targeted citation search. See literature review for more details including what type strategies were covered and where they were located.

Literature Review

The literature associated with cultural strategies is vast and spans many different disciplines – from arts management through to urban planning. However, there is a considerable deficit in research and analysis of cultural strategies produced by local authorities, cities, regions and at the national scale too.

How cultural strategies are convened, by whom and for what purpose are important questions to explore because, in order to derive learnings for policy, the specific conditions and contexts that lead to their development needs to be fully understood.

The following literature review takes a thematic approach, drawing out key themes that emerged during.

Four key areas emerged from the literature:

- o **Process and Representation**
- o **Scale**
- o **Instigators**
- o **Evaluation and Reporting**

Process and representation

One of the key themes within the literature on cultural strategies is the ongoing relationship between the formation, delivery plans, strategy documents, programme/delivery and monitoring/evaluation. This is framed as 'the process' or lifecycle of cultural strategies, and analysis of such reveals their specific localised place-specific conditions. In other words, the development of a typical cultural strategy goes beyond the physical policy documents and should not be seen as fixed.

Importantly, there is a clear distinction made between cultural *policy* and cultural *strategy*.

Cultural *policy* presents 'rules or principles which can be adapted into the management of arts programs or services' (Yoon 2022). In contrast, cultural *strategies* follow delivery plans, which involve specific actions and usually have distinct key performance indicators ('KPIs') such as event delivery targets or engaging with a specific local community.

The literature therefore suggests a distinction that situates *strategies* (and their evaluation) as inherently place-based, which requires an understanding of locality.

Victoria Barker and Jennie Jordan's 2022 study of Derby City Council's cultural strategy highlights this point. The authors trace the development of the city's

strategy through from a semi-informal network of venues and cultural institutions that came together to produce a festival. This informal collaboration developed into the basis for the cultural strategy. The research found that, whilst the more 'organic' and ecosystems-led approach to the development of the strategy did nurture a sense of shared value and inclusion in decision making processes for some, it also resulted in 'creating an unexamined mould which shaped the formal articulation of cultural strategy' (Barker and Jordan 2022, p. 289).

The authors point out that although the relationships that formed in collaboration during the festival were pertinent to the development of the strategy, they also culminated in an insular set of relationships that drew from a closed system comprising the 'usual suspects' (pp. 289-290).

The authors go on to evidence a distinct divide between those arts organisation involved in the strategy formation and those excluded from it, stating that '[t]he city is economically and ethnically diverse, but neither the strategy development process nor the published document were fully inclusive reflections of those communities' (p. 289).

This issue of representation within the process of developing cultural strategies is also analysed in a study based in Australia. The study focuses on Australia's National Arts and Disability Strategy introduced in 2009 (Yoon 2022).

The study's findings suggest that there were 'limitations and barriers to improving the social inclusion of people

with disability' (sic) (p.199). This points to the need for closer working relationships between the leadership teams designing cultural strategies and those whom the strategies are designed to serve.

Importantly, Yoon and others suggest this connection should continue 'post-implementation' to continually update and re-shape strategies. They suggest this may require a re-thinking of the way strategies are both positioned and utilised.

Scale

An emergent theme in the literature on cultural strategies is the interrelationship between geographic area, local cultural ecosystems and different layers of policy and strategy. One of the defining factors here is scale.

There is a broad range of cultural strategies that are aimed at different levels (or 'tiers') of government with different intended peoples, audiences, and communities which they serve – from town, city, city-region, district, county, region, national and even international. For example, the recently launched by Scottish Government (2024) is aimed at a national tier or government with a view to establishing Scotland's profile on an international scale as well as speaking to national agendas. Whereas, a strategy that covers a city-wide area such as The Leeds Cultural Strategy (2017-2030) is primarily inward facing for the city of Leeds but has an national and international aim of "nationally and internationally recognised as a liveable city, and a thriving, internationally connected cultural hub open to collaboration" (Leeds 2017). Then there

are combined authority strategies which cover a designated region such as **West of England Combined Authority's (WECA) Cultural Plan (2022)** in essence these are more themes based such as wellbeing and placemaking, as they need to cover heterogeneity of places within the area.

Many studies reviewed do not include a comparative analysis between cultural strategies sitting at different levels. This could be because the specificity of place and scale makes this particularly difficult to do.

Studies by Abigail Gilmore (2006) and Ashton and Bell (2023) identify some potential factors to compare between strategies. These tend to focus on broad goals or aims within the strategy documents, including: partnerships and advocacy; defining culture; socio-economic benefits (health and wellbeing agender); and environmental impacts. This suggests that scale becomes important when the intent and reasons behind strategy formation is clearly articulated.

Instigators

Cultural strategies are not a statutory requirement in the UK, with over half of local authorities not having a publicly available strategy (Ashton and Bell 2023).[2]

In the UK, Gilmore points out that a non-statutory position has, in some cases, been perceived as beneficial for some local authorities because they believed it had enabled them to be more flexible with their approach (Gilmore 2006, pp. 6-

8). This is of course not always the case and without support and guidance this 'flexibility' is less important.

Studies point to recurring reasons for instigating strategies. The following instigators are not exhaustive but capture the main factors:

o Don't have a coherent strategy
o Attracting investment
o Raising the profile of cultural services and provision
o Improving access and participation
o Joining-up portfolios and other strategies
o Cultural sector initiation through institutional collaboration

Bianchini and Parkinson's (1993) survey of European cultural policy in the 1980s and early 1990s details the implementation of cultural strategies within the broader discourse of urban development and the city 'image'.

The authors argue that the 'language of 'subsidy' was gradually replaced by the language of 'investment'' (p.13). This remains prevalent rhetoric across the strategies literature, and as the authors intimate, it provided a vehicle to allow local authorities to align with public and private investment strategies within econometric discourse. However, this alignment wedded culture to the much broader formation of the creative industries and created a dependency on economic growth metrics and measures at the expense of intrinsic and other instrumental value systems such as emotional response, mental health and

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[2] Accurate as of December 2023.

wellbeing, intellectual and spiritual engagement, political, environmental and social responses.

Other trends in Europe (particularly in Spain and Italy), include a distinct focus on tourism and the creation of cultural districts adopted through top-down competitive models (Kim 2008; Le Blanc 2010). There is less focus in these studies on ecosystems and the interdependencies of cultural ecologies and more on strategies catering for the international tourism market.

The vast majority of instigators are either internal to local authorities or come from cultural sector institutions. This illustrates the general direction of travel of cultural strategy formation from the 'top-down', which carries the inherent risk that strategies only serve a relatively select few.

Although more participatory methodologies are being implemented in the development phases of cultural strategies (see case studies below), the extent to which citizens are involved in active decisions about strategy implementation and priorities remains limited.

Evaluation and reporting

Overall, analysis of formal evaluation methodologies associated with cultural strategies is lacking.

There is a noticeable absence of specific criteria or outcomes within cultural strategies and often no established baseline to which formal evaluation methodologies can be applied.

Indeed, local authorities tend to report on indicators through an outputs-based assessment framework rather than an evidence-based outcomes analysis. In other words, simply reporting on specific actions or services proposed within a strategy will not capture the impact or effects that these services have on local communities.

This distinction is further highlighted in Australian and US contexts by Kim Dunphy (2010), regarding the need to move towards more evidence-based outcomes evaluation:

> 'very few [evaluations] provided any real evidence regarding the effectiveness of the proposed action strategies. The absence of evidence-based studies means that recommendations for action could only be speculative' (p. 108).

Interestingly, this finding was echoed throughout literature spanning circa 30 years and covering multiple countries and contexts.

Local authorities could do more to establish a shared understanding of key priorities like participation so that meaningful baseline criteria can be established and outcomes measured. Although, some of this work is being carried out, often in partnership with universities, it is pocketed at best.

Ashton and Bell's (2023) report on cultural strategies highlights that both the Local Government Association (LGA) and Arts Council England (ACE) have published resources to support the development of cultural strategies in

England. These resources provide some basic outlines and a loose set of principles that Local Authorities can implement but they do not include detailed guidance or tools on evaluation of strategies.

Although these resources are not designed to delve into specific contextual nuances associated with different places, they do point out that process and methods will be context specific. However, there is a distinct lack of detail on evaluation practices beyond the fact that the LGA suggests that evaluation should be implemented from the start (iterative) and not simply an add on (LGA 2020). Interestingly, this is a trend across local government associations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales with toolkits being created aimed at different areas of policy such as migration but not focused on cultural strategy evaluation.

Analysis

The following section builds upon the four themes identified from the literature review and draws on three 'live' cultural strategies: Wigan Council, Belfast City Council and Sheffield City Council (three place partners involved in the open policy development programme).

Each of these cultural strategies is at a different point in their respective life cycle and it is important to stress that Sheffield's strategy is still in the early development phase. Belfast is right in the middle of their delivery phase and Wigan is moving onto the next iteration after several years of delivery.

Before we begin, it is important to outline what we mean by 'the local' in the context of our discussion of cultural strategies. In cultural policy studies there has been a lack of focus on how locality plays out in specific policy decisions, with the vast majority of attention given to national or global contexts (Durrer et al., 2023).

In their recent book *Cultural Policy is Local*, the authors have begun to address this issue by calling for a 'de-coupling' of policy from a national perspective. In doing so, they have opening debate on the interrelationships that play out on a local scale from the ground up rather than from a top-down national position. They argue that:

> 'In reality, the local provides the sites for assemblage, in which different trajectories, capacities and approaches can interact—and

so it is also the site at which there is most contestation over questions of what culture is valued and resourced.'
(Durrer et al., 2023, pp. 7-8).

This paper takes this position as a conceptual framing of 'the local' moving beyond the creative industries model with its emphasis on economic measures and placemaking through a top-down regenerative imperative. Further, what is referred to 'the local' is never fixed or uniform across the board and is constantly changing albeit in uneven ways.

Instigators and Influences

The instigating factors that led to the development of cultural strategies across all three of the local authority areas we have focussed on varied significantly.

Belfast's cultural strategy, titled *A City Imagining* (2020), was open to public consultation in 2019.[3] One of the key instigating factors was the city's bid to become European Capital of Culture 2023 (ECoC).

Part of the requirement for ECoC is that a cultural strategy is developed (UK Government 2014). Due to the UK voting to exit the European Union in 2016, Belfast was no longer eligible to bid for ECoC. However, Belfast City Council took the decision to follow through on the ambition and momentum of the bid by developing a ten-year cultural strategy

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[3] This is a 10-year strategy running from 2020-2030.

(Cultural Strategy for Belfast 2020-2030, Public Consultation Report 2019, p.9).

There were also a set of other interconnecting factors at play in Belfast. As outlined in a report conducted by FitzGibbon and Spence (2023), the successful bid for the UNESCO *City of Music* designation and the capital development of *Belfast Stories* visitor attraction coupled with the 'restructuring and expansion of [the] Culture team (within a portfolio that includes Tourism and Events)' (p.1). Each of these factors played a significant role in the council's decision to develop its cultural strategy and will continue to influence the process and lifecycle of the strategy.

In Wigan the cultural strategy was initiated from within the cultural sector and working in direct partnership with the local authority.

In 2017, Wigan Council identified a major gap in its cultural services and provision during an independent peer review process led by the Local Government Association (LGA) (Wigan Council 2018). This led to a consultation process led by consultants and an approach by artist-duo 'Al and Al' to develop a sector-led manifesto that was a stand-alone document to communicate and convene interested parties in the area.

In Sheffield's case, the instigators have been multiple and complex. There was an interim strategy in place since 2021 delivered by Sheffield's Culture Collective. The Culture Collective are a Cultural Compact[4], and their board consists of

members from 'local government, culture and creative industries, the voluntary sector, higher education and, uniquely to Sheffield's Compact, the private sector' (Culture Collective 2021).

The combination of no city-wide strategy and a lack of joined up cultural services and provision for a core-city brought the need for cultural strategy to fore. A sense that decision making in the city had been too polarised and significantly 'top-down' in approach also contributed. One of the main priorities in the development of the strategy was to readdress this imbalance.

The Compact was instrumental in pushing for a city-wide strategy and continue to work closely with a professional strategy development team now working under the direction of Sheffield City Council.

These different instigators in all three places support the findings from the literature, because they speak to investment and joining-up of provision as outlined by Bianchini and Parkinson (1993). However, the extent to which cultural sectors and wider local stakeholders are involved in the process from the beginning varies. This variation reveals the impetus behind each strategy and the unique set of factors involved within the specific places. These factors play out in the degree to which different local stakeholders are involved the process from its inception.

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[4] Arts Council England programmes
https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/review-cultural-compacts-initiative

Local Decision Making

A criticism of cultural strategies is that they can often be 'top-down' in approach which can prevent local decision-making and engender counter-narratives that erode trust between policymakers, cultural sector stakeholders and local people (Barker and Jordan 2022).

Each of the three areas we focus on in this paper have developed their own methods of addressing this.

Belfast for example has introduced a participatory budgeting pilot, citizen participation and advisory groups for LGBTQIA+ communities, and Section 75 groups[5]. These methods, which could broadly be understood as the City Council's commitment to co-design, have sat within the Belfast 2024 development rather than directly related to the cultural strategy (FitzGibbon and Spence 2023).

Similarly, Sheffield has focused its pre-engagement, scoping and events platforms on local neighbourhoods, as well as developing online citizen-focused workshops and events.

Both Belfast and Sheffield have taken more of a citizen-led approach to their scoping and development phases. There is evidence that they are attempting to implement elements of co-design into their processes and move strategy formation closer to local people. Yet, as noted by FitzGibbon and Spence, in the case of Belfast:

'Few co-design processes have been embedded in the higher levels of governance and planning of either [Belfast 2024] or the Cultural Strategy.' (p.4)

The authors go onto add that this process is complex and that movement towards discrete co-design has clearly begun within BCC, but that embedding this aspect of the strategy will require careful evaluation, funding and resources. It remains too early in the processes in Sheffield to determine whether its co-design will be abel to adopted at scale and on what basis.

Wigan's focus has been on understanding the area's cultural ecosystem.[6] This landscape in Wigan s quite different from both Belfast and Sheffield, with a comparatively small number of venues and cultural organisations.[7]

Further complexity is added with its proximity to Manchester and it's relationship to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) (an 'upper tier' governance structure).

As a result, the Wigan Council's co-design processes have been focused on building trust with Wigan's cultural sector, as this relationship was not established prior to this process. Much of this has been channelled through continued engagement with local cultural sector stakeholders and the artist-led manifesto.

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[5] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/northern-ireland-equality-scheme-for-hmrc/appendix-2-example-groups-relevant-to-the-section-75-categories-for-northern-ireland-purposes

[6] Belfast and Sheffield have also extensively consulted and worked with cultural ecosystems but there is a distinct focus on citizens in their processes.
[7] Found through an NPO comparison with Sheffield and desk reports/Google searches.

The learning that we can take from these specific approaches and methods is that all three places have engaged elements of co-design, albeit limited.

Decisions to engage with different stakeholders from local citizens to arts organisations matter if making more strategies more meaningful and democratic is the goal.

However, as the literature warns, taking certain organisations as proxies for different neighbourhoods, communities, groups and citizens may not always lead to meaningful change and could actually mask and obscure inequalities.

Developing co-designed processes at scale is never linear and requires both funds and resources as well as place-based and local tacit knowledge that are not always present in local authorities or strategy development teams. The key questions here are: What are the priorities of strategies themselves and who are they designed to serve?

Strategy Alignment

There is evidence in all three places that cultural strategies are aligned with other local, regional and national strategies.

In the case of Wigan, the cultural strategy and manifesto shares a close connection with its **corporate strategy** in terms of providing opportunities for young people, attracting external investment and 'embracing culture, heritage and sport' (Wigan Council 2020). There are also synergies with specific localised priority issues; for example, both its corporate strategy and cultural manifesto point to infrastructural changes, such as plans for Wigan Pier and regeneration of the surrounding 'quarter'.

In both Sheffield and Wigan, funding and support from national arm's-length bodies such as Arts Council England (ACE) and National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) feed into their strategies via schemes such as [Creative People and Places](#) (CPP), with Wigan being one of [ACE's Priority Places.](#) These strategies dovetail with national agendas around 'levelling up' places that have historically seen less investment than others.

There is a level of regional complexity in both Wigan and Sheffield because they are also part of a combined authority. Both the GMCA and South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) have their own set of strategies in a variety of policy areas, which intersect in different ways.

For example, SYMCA does not have a specific cultural strategy but it does have an **economic strategy** where culture is positioned as a key aspect. As might be

expected, the language in the SYMCA economic strategy contextualises culture within an econometric system focused on growth and attracting investment and employment:

> 'Sheffield is a destination city; a magnet for enterprise and talent, a hub of employment and curator of creativity and culture.' (SYMCA 2021, p.112).

Of course, these aims are also expressed within Sheffield's cultural strategy development, but they are articulated in different socio-cultural terms and are geared towards local decision making rather than explicitly econometric language; this was exemplified in their presentation during Culture Commons' Knowledge Exchange session in February 2024. They suggested that:

> 'Our approach will aim to rebalance the conversation around culture to magnify voices that are less frequently heard, alongside institutional perspectives.' (Fourth Street 2024).

Apparent across all three cultural strategies is that the language used, and the priorities outlined, are not completely geared towards economic growth and cultural industries outcomes. There is significant emphasis on social, education and health outcomes for the three places, with policy consultation and connections to adjacent departments and portfolios.

For example, Wigan's manifesto states that they worked to 'establish a Local Cultural Education Partnership, with support from Curious Minds, who are

dedicated to improving the lives of children and young people' (The Fire Within 2019). These wide-ranging priorities correlated with findings from Ashton and Bell's (2023) report, which found that 'issues of place, health and the environment often feature within cultural strategies' (p.4).

As the capital city of Northern Ireland, Belfast holds a different position with the socio-political and cultural discourse. Secondly, as a post-conflict state, there are sensitivities that impact upon cultural policy creation and regionally how the city relates to the rest of the country. Finally, in political terms, Belfast is part of a devolved nation and has a unique set of policy mechanisms to operate with.

Overall, the city has developed a cultural policy that draws from the *Belfast Agenda*, which is a broader strategy for the city and region. Both the cultural strategy and the *Belfast Agenda* position the role of citizen-centred change as high priority and there are clear synergies (FitzGibbon and Spence 2023).

However, there are questions of alignment when it comes to how the cultural strategy sits with other key strategies such as *A Bolder Vision for Belfast*, *Belfast Local Development Plan* and the *City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy*. The complexity of this issue is articulated by FitzGibbon and Spence as each new policy document 'identifies new metrices while there has been no concerted effort to track previous metrices' (p. 3).

This issue is not limited to Belfast, with competing agendas often cited in the literature, and as we have seen in the

language used between Sheffield's cultural strategy development and SYMCA's economic strategy.

Interestingly, FitzGibbon and Spence propose a potential solution for Belfast: a phased delivery where specific intersections with concurrent policy delivery could become benchmarks for data collection and evaluation (p.3). They suggest that 'there is scope for (a significant part of) B24's legacy being the activation and continuation of such relationships in Phase Two of Belfast's cultural strategy' (p.3).

Evaluation and Reporting

There is no overall evaluative framework or formal methodology for cultural strategies embedded in the three areas. This is supported by the literature review. However, elements of evaluation and specific discrete evaluations are prevalent within the overall processes involved in strategy development across all three places.

Wigan

In Wigan, the Council has implemented an internal scrutiny report system, which monitors aspects such as budgets and key strategic policy aims across departments. The Council has utilised this process to report and monitor elements of the strategy especially against funding and investment.

So far, Wigan has evaluated each of the individual events that have formed the strategy development and implementation phases. These have mainly consisted of audience monitoring through surveys. However, they are working towards embedding a more formal evaluation process within the cultural partnership as they move towards the next phase of the cultural strategy.

They also highlight the *Creative People and Places Scheme*, *Down to Earth* as potentially providing an in-depth qualitative evidence-based evaluative case-study.

Belfast

In Belfast's case, there have been many different evaluations of discrete events,

projects and programmes that are referenced within the cultural strategy.

An example of this is Belfast 2024, where external consultants have developed an evaluation framework which focuses on the key stakeholders and beneficiary groups including audiences, participants, cultural sector organisations, creative individuals, and workers.

The Council has also created a consortium of 'critical friends' from cultural and educational institutions throughout the city.

Sheffield

Sheffield is still in the planning phase of its cultural strategy, so details are scarce when it comes to evaluation. Nonetheless, the strategy development team are attempting to implement an outcomes-based evaluation, which both draws from the specific projects that are being delivered and aims to establish baselines to gather robust evidence.

Akin to Wigan, there is also internal reporting to Sheffield City Council and other stakeholders, partners and participants throughout the development process.

A 'task and finish group'[8] has been set up to deliver the majority of this reporting.

Fragmented evaluation

Overall, findings point towards the complexity of developing local cultural strategies.

Whether instigated by local authorities, consortiums, from within the cultural sector or through consultant-led commissioning, there is a tendency to produce evaluations of specific outputs with discrete evaluations parcelled off to different consultants or partner institutions. As a result, there remains a disjointed relationship regarding a deeper understanding of the local socio-economic, cultural and political impacts of cultural strategies. This echoes the findings from both Ashton and Bell (2023) and FitzGibbon and Spence (2023) in this area.

A city- or region-wide collaborative approach to evaluation could help bring together discrete evaluations. The exact mechanisms for this will be specific to the locality, but could draw upon the HE partnerships, relationships and participants involved in the development processes.

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[8] The current members of the task and finish group are referenced here:
https://haveyoursay.sheffield.gov.uk/culture-

strategy/news_feed/introducing-our-steering-group

Summary

One of the key themes to emerge from this analysis is **that local authorities are increasingly employing participatory methodologies to develop their cultural strategies. This chimes with trends in cultural policy and practice** over recent years (Durrer et al. 2023; FitzGibbon and Spence 2023). However, the extent to which management and leadership structures at higher levels of decision making are moving towards embedding co-design remains limited. Further still, co-design incorporating more creative and people-centred evaluation processes remains scarce.

The processes of developing cultural strategies, which go well beyond the documents themselves, represent vehicles for local decision making, as they act as a convener within and of ecosystems. However, there is a danger that this then falls away 'post-delivery'; and although each of the places and strategies referenced in this paper is at a different stage in its life cycle, maintaining relationships seems to remain a challenge.

Findings suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the purpose of a cultural strategies and whom they are designed to serve in the development phase. Learning from both the case studies and the literature highlights a delicate balancing act, with the need for local authority internal structures to be more collaborative.

Learning from both Wigan and Belfast suggests that **developing trust between different people, groups and communities can only be realised through longer-term programmes, which need to consider who is involved and how these relationships will be fostered over time**.

This points to widening participation in the development of cultural strategies beyond traditional cultural sector stakeholders. Crucially, this will likely need to be done in sustainable ways that that do not damage established working relationships or impose power structures onto others. Similarly, evidence suggests that a recognition of the need for equity between everyone involved is required.

Evaluation processes and frameworks are still emerging in this space and there is not yet a coherent set of methodological approaches. Much of this is down to time, resources and capacity of those teams delivering cultural strategies. **However, there is potential for more collaborative evaluation methodologies, which bring together discrete evaluations with deeper, more qualitative insights from place-based projects. The challenge here will be bringing this potentially diverse place-specific data together in a holistic way and thinking about how different funding criteria can speak to each other given their diverse indicators.**

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